



DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SERVICES NEWSLETTER

October 2007

The African American Community and Domestic Violence

Prevention, education, and social change are keys to eliminating domestic violence

This is the second in a series of one-page newsletters focusing on the issue of culture and domestic violence. The Office of Family Violence understands that experiences of domestic violence vary from person to person. These newsletters hope to offer a glimpse into how someone from a particular community or culture may see and experience domestic violence differently from another. The second newsletter focuses on the African American community. Sumayya Coleman of the Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence Action Alliance talked to Urmila Oberoi about some of the issues African American women face when dealing with domestic violence.

Urmila Oberoi (UO): *Can you talk a little bit about the unique cultural issues survivors in your community are dealing with when it comes to domestic violence? What cultural norms/practices have you seen that are different or unique from what someone else might be dealing with?*

Sumayya Coleman (SC): People of color consistently deal with issues pertaining to shame and blame, internalized oppressions, apathy and a lack of local community resources. When victims of domestic violence in this specific group seek support to end the violence, permanent, affordable and safe housing is the paramount concern. Transportation, childcare, and employment remain issues that hinder victims from removing themselves from the environment. These matters are exacerbated by cultural beliefs held by African American women, in particular, who overwhelmingly deal with the absence of fathers and husbands. The disproportionate number of African American men in prison and/or under/unemployed, the rate of HIV/AIDS, the use and presence of substance abuse and violence in their communities effect their intimate partner experience.

Lack of family support systems also make reporting and ending violence a crucial decision which can negatively impact the situation (e.g. escalate the violence, expose the situation to those who might not respect or hold confidentiality, interfere with a couple's relationship).

UO: *Do you feel that there are still stigmas attached to reporting domestic violence in your communities? What kinds of stigmas and where do they stem from?*

SC: Yes, stigmas are still attached to reporting. Snitching is a huge problem in the African American community. Though this is mostly related to reporting drug related or gang related crimes, domestic violence is usually identified among these situations. Stigmas are associated with causing the demise of "a brother's" reputation, reporting him to "the man" is about turning him over to a predominantly white system that will treat him based on his race. These situations can put victims in a precarious situation of becoming an informant. Stigmas are also associated with economic class; low-income women allow men to come into their homes and violate them. This perpetuates the stereotypes of women using men for money

as gold diggers. Many of these stigmas and stereotypes are perpetuated by music and art as well.

UO: *Does religion play a role in compelling women to stay in abusive relationships in your community? How so? What kinds of thoughts do women have to justify themselves staying?*

SC: Religion plays a big part in some women's decision to stay. Their religious affiliations encourage submission and a strong reliance on their faith community. However, seldom does the faith community provide a long-term safe living situation for them and their children. The religious doctrine teaches humility in all situations, which causes helplessness and powerlessness in the face of violence in the home. The woman is made responsible for the violence due to her inability to make the perpetrator change, her inability to make good life decisions, or her fall from grace.

UO: *What are some other cultural issues/norms that prevent women from reporting abuse and not leaving?*

SC: Some women fear losing touch with their family members; loss of respect from family and friends. They are also afraid of being seen as unable to handle personal business.

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Office of Family Violence (OFV)

The Office of Family Violence (OFV) funds local public and private non-profit domestic violence programs whose mission and purpose are to address the issue of domestic violence within their community and respond to the needs of all people in that community who have experienced and/or been impacted by domestic violence.

OFV values the provision of consistent reliable services for victims and children in every locality of the Commonwealth. With the recent adoption of the Virginia Sexual and Domestic Violence Agency Accreditation manual, the funding priorities of the OFV will shift toward fully accredited programs.

Accredited domestic violence programs provide hotline, information and referral, crisis intervention, safety planning, emergency companion services, emergency transportation, individual support services, legal advocacy, support groups, children's services, community coordination and systems advocacy, community education, emergency housing services and outreach and access for underserved populations. For more information on Accreditation please see:

<http://www.vsdvalliance.org>.

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UO: *Has it gotten better? Have you seen an improvement in the number of women who are reporting abuse and leaving? Have you seen an improvement in the services that shelters provide to those from underserved communities?*

SC: I wish I could report that there has been more positive change over the past 20 years...

We can't deal with 2007's problems in the same way we dealt with 1990's problems. We need more innovation and money to deal with these specific matters through prevention, education, and social change.

Resources to go to for More Information on the African American Community and Domestic Violence:

Afro-American Counseling & Psychotherapy Institute, Inc.

1629 K. St., N.W.

Suite 300

Washington, DC 20006

Phone: 202-723-0030

Website: <http://www.afroamericancounseling.com/>

Women Empowered Against Violence (WEAVE)

1111 16th St., N.W.

Suite 200

Washington, DC 20036

Phone: 202-452-9550

Website: <http://www.weaveincorp.org/>

Institute on Domestic Violence in the African American Community

University of Minnesota

Website: <http://www.dvinstitute.org/>